SPORT

Last-gasp Al-Ammari penalty snatches Iraq World Cup play-off berth

BASRA: Iraq scored a penalty 17 minutes into stoppage time to claim a dramatic 2-1 home win over the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday and secure a 3-2 aggregate playoff victory over their neighbours that keeps the country's World Cup qualification dream alive.

Amir Al-Ammari struck from the spot to take Graham Arnold's side into March's intercontinental playoffs in front of a packed-out Basra International Stadium.

The winner came after substitute Mohanad Ali had headed in a 66th-minute equaliser for the Iraqis, who had gone behind to Caio Lucas' opener 14 minutes earlier.

Iraq, whose only appearance at a World Cup was a group-stage exit in Mexico in 1986, will now join five other teams in the playoffs with two spots at the finals available.

A game of few opportunities came to life in the 52nd minute when Yahia Nader drove through midfield to slip the ball into the path of Caio Lucas, the Brazil-born forward taking a touch before scoring beyond Jalal Hassan.

The Emiratis almost doubled their lead two minutes later, only for Nicolas Gimenez's volley to crash against the crossbar with Hassan, who was celebrating his 100th appearance for Iraq, well beaten.

Iraq were second-best for much of the game but a set piece allowed Arnold's side to pull level.

Al-Ammari swung his free kick from the left flank towards the six-yard box and Ali's header took a deflection off Nader that ensured goalkeeper Khalid Eisa had little chance of preventing the ball from crossing the line.

The home side piled on the pressure late on, with Ali missing two good chances to score a winner.

Ali was heavily involved again as Iraq were awarded the decisive penalty, the striker connecting with a header that Nader swatted away with his arm and referee Yusuke Araki pointed to the spot after viewing the pitchside monitor.

Al-Ammari thumped the spotkick high into the goal as Eisa dived the wrong way to spark celebrations in the stands and keep alive his nation's hopes of ending their 40-year wait to play in a World Cup.—Agencies

GLASGOW: Scotland's Scott McTominay scores from a bicycle kick against Denmark during their 2026 World Cup qualifier at the Hampden Park.—Reuters

Scotland, Austria end 28-year wait to reach World Cup

PARIS: Injury-time wonder-goals by Kieran Tierney and Kenny McLean handed Scotland a stunning 4-2 win over Denmark on Tuesday, and dramatic return to the World Cup after a 28-year wait.

Austria needed a late equaliser for a 1-1 home draw against Bosnia and Herzegovina to also make it back to the global footballing showpiece for the first time since 1998, while top-ranked Spain clinched their spot with a 2-2 draw against Turkey that equalled Italy's 31-match unbeaten record in competitive games in Europe.

Belgium thumped Liechtenstein 7-0 to reach next year's tournament as Switzerland secured their place in the United States, Canada and Mexico after a 1-1 draw at Kosovo.

Level at 2-2 as the clock ticked past 90, Denmark were set to advance to the World Cup as Group 'C' winners until Tierney curled in an exquisite finish from distance three minutes into injury time.

McLean then put the match beyond doubt as he lifted the ball over Danish goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel, who was well off his line, from the halfway line on 98 minutes.

"We've been on a journey. I spoke to them about it pre-match, about how this is the opportunity we've waited for. What a night, eh?" Scotland coach Steve Clarke said. "This was the chance, one game. This was like a playoff final. We put everything on the line. There's always one last step and it's always the hardest."

Napoli midfielder Scott McTominay had given the hosts a third-minute lead with a towering overhead kick.

McTominay's club-mate Rasmus Hojlund levelled for Denmark from the spot just shy of the hour, before his side went down to 10 as Rasmus Kristensen picked up a second booking.

An anxious Hampden Park let out a roar of ecstasy and relief in the 78th minute as Lawrence Shankland turned in from close range.

But Denmark struck back again through Patrick Dorgu four minutes later before Tierney and McLean stole the headlines.

"That just sums up this squad," captain Andy Robertson told the BBC. "Never say die. We just keep going right to the end and one of the craziest games. We put the country through it, but I'm sure it's worth it. We're going to the World Cup."

Denmark will now be in Thursday's draw for the European play-offs, which will take place next March.

In another winner-take-all match, Austria held Bosnia and Herzegovina to a draw at home to win Group 'H' and make it back to the World Cup.

"I can't believe it; we made it! I have been trying to reach the World Cup for 18 years. Finally now, at the end of my career, we got there. I can't wait," 36-year-old Austrian forward Marko Arnautovic said.

Michael Gregoritsch bundled home a 77th-minute leveller that Austria needed to qualify.

"It was difficult. It was really difficult," Austria coach Ralf Rangnick said. "Conceding a goal naturally made it even more difficult. But then we threw everything into it and were eventually rewarded. If Bosnia play like this, they will progress too."

Haris Tabakovic's early strike had looked as if it might be enough for the visitors to snatch first place from under Austria's noses until Gregoritsch condemned Bosnia, which last played in football's showcase event in 2014 in Brazil, to the play-offs.

Switzerland will appear in a sixth successive World Cup finals after drawing in Pristina against Kosovo to win Group 'B'.

With the Swiss needing to avoid a defeat by six goals to seal top spot, they rarely looked troubled as Ruben Vargas handed them the lead in the 47th minute before Florent Muslija equalised.

Kosovo, seeking their first World Cup appearance, had already secured second place.

Euro 2024 winners Spain found themselves in a similar situation in Seville against Turkey but also never looked like going down to the seven-goal loss that would have sent the visitors through in their place.

Dani Olmo fired Spain ahead but Deniz Gul and Salih Ozcan struck for Turkey as the hosts conceded their first goals in the qualification process.

But Mikel Oyarzabal hit back after the hour to extend Spain's unbeaten run.

"We wanted to finish with a win and a clean sheet, so it's bitter-sweet... but we're happy to qualify for the World Cup," Olmo told TVE.

Belgium, semi-finalists in 2018, cruised into the draw for the World Cup with a Jeremy Doku-inspired hammering of Liechtenstein.

The Manchester City winger grabbed a brace in Liege as Charles De Ketelaere also netted twice and Hans Vanaken, Brandon Mechele and Alexis Saelemaekers completed the rout.

In the other Group 'J' match, second-placed Wales also ran up seven goals as they beat North Macedonia 7-1 with Harry Wilson scoring a hat-trick of set-piece goals.

North Macedonia can, nonetheless, look forward to a play-off place courtesy of their Nations League performance.

Romania, who beat San Marino by the same scoreline, will also have the chance to reach the World Cup thanks to the Nations League after finishing third in Group 'H'.

Sweden, who picked up just their second point of the qualifying campaign with a 1-1 home draw against Slovenia, advanced in the same manner.

The 16-team European play-offs will allow an additional four teams from the continent to make it to North America next year.—Agencies

Belgium beat France to reach Davis Cup semis

BOLOGNA: Belgium reached the semi-finals of the Davis Cup after winning both singles matches against France in Bologna.

Raphael Collignon and Zizou Bergs came through respective singles clashes against Corentin Moutet and Arthur Rinderknech to set up a potential clash in the last four with holders and hosts Italy.

Collignon came back from a set down to beat world number 35 Moutet 2-6, 7-5, 7-5, while Bergs saw off Rinderknech, France's highest ranked player at 29 in the world, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

The two wins for Belgium mean that the scheduled doubles match featuring Belgium's Sander Gille and Joran Vliegen against Benjamin Bonzi and Pierre-Hugues Herbert will not be played.

The highest ranked player at the Davis Cup finals is former Olympic champion Alexander Zverev, ranked three in the world.

But the German, whose country face Argentina on Thursday, recently blasted the current format, calling it "an exhibition tournament".

He wasn't the only one to criticise the tournament, with Sinner saying during the ATP Finals that he "never unfortunately played the Davis Cup, the real Davis Cup", and suggested each edition be played over two years.

Ross Hutchins, the head of the International Tennis Federation which organises the Davis Cup, insisted that the absences of three headline players were "three specific cases" and not a sign of the tournament being snubbed by the sport's stars.

Hutchins cited Musetti saying that the imminent birth of his second child played a part in his decision, but the world number eight said last week that the physical and emotional stress of a long season was the main reason for his withdrawal.

Sinner dropped out in order to get an extra week of close-season rest after completing a complicated campaign by retaining the ATP Finals.—AFP

BOLOGNA: Belgium's Zizou Bergs hits a return against Arthur Rinderknech of France during their Davis Cup Final 8 match at the Unipol Arena.—Reuters

Victories for Lahore Whites, Peshawar as race for final intensifies

LAHORE: Lahore Whites beat Bahawalpur by five wickets while Peshawar bagged a vital 189-run win against Multan to end up tied with Faisalabad on 132 points, below the top two sides on the table, Sialkot and Karachi Blues, as the eighth round of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy ended on Wednesday.

The results in the penultimate round turned the last-round fixtures enticing with table toppers Sialkot (149 points) and Karachi Blues (138) taking on each other at the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi while Faisalabad will face No.8 Bahawalpur at the Marghzar Cricket Ground Islamabad on Sunday.

Peshawar are set to face Islamabad at the Diamond Cricket ground with all top four teams seeking outright wins to qualify for the five-day Quaid-e-Azam Trophy final starting on Nov 29 at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.

On Wednesday, Peshawar dismissed Multan for a paltry 92 on the third day, who fell 189 runs short of the 282-run target, as skipper Sajid Khan picked up 6-39 — the off-spinner's 22nd first-class five-wicket haul and third in this tournament.

Test spinner Sajid, 32, in the process also completed his second consecutive match haul of 10 wickets (10-142 vs Lahore Whites; 10-68 vs Multan) in the tournament and sixth in his first-class career.

Starting the day with 2-1, Multan crumbled after reaching 53-2 at one point with only Test batter Imran Butt (39) occupying the crease hitting four fours. Sajid was aided by Mohammad Irfan who took 3-10.

Multan, placed ninth, now take on No.10 team Abbottabad at the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium in the last round as both teams look to avoid relegation.

At the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium, Lahore Whites reached the 136-run target after resuming from overnight score of 58-4.

Player-of-the-match Hussain Talat, who turned up in the eighth round fresh from hitting the winning runs for Pakistan in their third ODI against Sri Lanka, remained unbeaten on 49 off 90 striking three fours and one six to back up his first innings score of 58 — the only half-century in the match.

Following a 50-run fifth-wicket stand with Tayyab Tahir (32), Hussain stitched an unbeaten 47-run partnership with Qasim Akram (17 not out) to take their team home, who are now placed sixth on the table with two wins out of their eight games and will face No.5 outfit Fata at the Imran Khan Cricket Stadium in Peshawar in the last round.—Agencies

LA28 unveils first look at 2028 Paralympic schedule

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles marked 1,000 days to go until its first Paralympic Games by unveiling on Wednesday an initial competition schedule for the 2028 event, which organizers say will feature more sports, sessions and medals than ever before.

The LA28 organising committee said the event would include 23 sports and 560 medal events across 294 sessions, developed with international federations and Olympic Broadcasting Services to balance athlete wellbeing with global broadcast opportunities.

"Los Angeles' first Paralympic Games means so much to all of us, and our teams have made it their mission to create a competition schedule guided by and geared toward the needs of the athletes," Ileana Rodriguez, LA28 vice president of Paralympic strategy and relations, told Reuters.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass said the city would host its first Paralympic Games with a record number of women athletes competing on the world stage. The 2028 opening ceremony is set for Aug. 15, 2028 at SoFi Stadium, with the close on Aug 27 at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

The first Paralympic champions in Los Angeles will be crowned on day 1 in Para athletics, wheelchair fencing, shooting Para sport, Para equestrian and Para track cycling.—Reuters

Raja, Hamza shine

LAHORE: Diamond Paints/Din FG/Din won their respective matches on the second day of the SQ Seagold Polo Cup here at the Lahore Polo Club ground on Wednesday.

Raja Jalal Arsalan's six goals stole the show as he helped Diamond Paints/Din edge out Seagold NewAge Cables 7–6. Mir Shoaib Ahmed added one.

For the losing side, Saqib Khan Khakwani scored five while Adnan Jalil contributed one.

The second match saw FG/Din earn a 5-2½ win against SEAFA Logistics International.

For FG/Din, Hamza Mawaz Khan struck four goals while Sheikh Mohammad Raffay added one. Retired Col Omer Minhas of SEADA Logistics International, which had a half-goal handicap advantage, scored a brace.—Sports Reporter

Curacao seal World Cup fairytale as Haiti, Panama qualify

KINGSTON: The tiny Caribbean nation of Curacao became the smallest country ever to qualify for the World Cup on Tuesday as Haiti defied the odds to book their return to the tournament for the first time in 52 years along with Panama.

The three clinched top spots in their respective groups to advance from the North and Central American and Caribbean (CONCACAF) region to the 48-team finals in Canada, Mexico and the US.

A nerve-shredding finale to the qualifying campaign saw Curacao — with a population of just 156,000 — squeeze into next year's finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico with a 0-0 draw against Jamaica in Kingston to stay one point ahead of their hosts at the top of Group 'B'.

KINGSTON: Curacao coach Dean Gorre (R) and players celebrate after they qualify for the World Cup following their match against Jamaica at the National Stadium Independence Park.—Reuters

Haiti, meanwhile, who last appeared in the World Cup in 1974, also completed an improbable qualification campaign with a 2-0 win over Nicaragua to finish top of Group 'C'.

Ironically, Haiti secured their decisive qualification victory in Curacao, where the team have been forced to play their home qualifiers due to unrest in their homeland.

Panama, meanwhile, grabbed the other automatic qualification spot on offer on Tuesday with a 3-0 win over El Salvador at home ensuring they ended up as winners of Group 'A'.

That victory ended Suriname's hopes of grabbing automatic qualification. Suriname, beaten 3-1 away by Guatemala, nevertheless squeezed into the playoff places.

Curacao, whose veteran Dutch coach Dick Advocaat was forced to miss the game due to a family issue in the Netherlands, were left celebrating a historic result.

The team, made up entirely of players born in the Netherlands with Antillean roots, known as the 'Blue Wave' finished top of Group 'B' with 12 points from six games.

A self-governing part of the Netherlands, Curacao are by far the smallest nation ever to qualify for the World Cup, which is being expanded to 48 teams next year for the first time.

The previous smallest country to qualify for the tournament were Iceland in 2018, with a population of around 350,000.

Curacao finally booked their place after an extraordinary finale at Kingston's National Stadium, where Jamaica — coached by former England manager Steve McClaren — launched a furious onslaught as they chased the win which would guarantee them a World Cup place at their opponents' expense.

The Jamaicans hit the woodwork three times in the second half, with substitute Bailey-Tye Cadamarteri going agonizingly close with a header that crashed off the post in the 87th minute.

There was more drama in store in stoppage time, when Jamaica were awarded a penalty after substitute Jeremy Antonisse's sliding tackle brought down Dujuan Richards in the area.

Salvadoran referee Ivan Barton pointed to the spot to leave Curacao facing the prospect of a heartbreaking defeat.

But as Curacao's players protested, the decision went to VAR and was dramatically overturned to leave the Caribbean islanders on course for the World Cup.

Haiti's qualification was remarkable given that armed gangs have taken control of almost all of the capital, Port-au-Prince, in a conflict that has forced some 1.3 million people from their homes and fuelled famine-level hunger.

The levels of danger in Haiti are such that their coach, Sbastien Migne, has not been there since being appointed 18 months ago but the Frenchman has nevertheless managed to engineer a fairytale qualification their second after a first appearance in 1974.

Haiti started the final round of fixtures on Tuesday behind Honduras on goal difference, but goals from Louicious Deedson and Ruben Providence lifted them to 11 points, while Honduras drew 0-0 away at Costa Rica and finished on nine.

Panama romped through their game, ahead early after a thunderous strike from wingback Cesar Blackman, with their second coming from the penalty spot courtesy of Eric Davis, who was in the squad when Panama made their only previous World Cup appearance in 2018.

Substitute Jose Luis Rodriguez added a third late in the game.

Suriname had been ahead of Panama on goal difference before the start of Tuesday's games but in Guatemala. However, a late own goal kept them in World Cup contention as they will go, along with Jamaica, to the inter-confederation playoff tournament in March.

There, the two CONCACAF teams will be matched against Bolivia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and New Caledonia. The six teams will be vying for two spots at the finals.—Agencies